British cabinet reshuffle

Mandelson appointed Northern Ireland Secretary in an effort to rescue "peace process"

Mike Ingram
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In the fourth cabinet reshuffle within a year, Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair has attempted to extricate his government from a deepening political crisis in Northern Ireland. Peter Mandelson replaced Mo Mowlam as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, just 10 months after he had resigned from the Department of Trade and Industry amidst a financial scandal.

Mandelson arrived in Belfast talking tough. "There is no alternative to the Good Friday agreement. There is no plan B. It is that or nothing," he said. In December 1998 he was forced to resign following revelations that he had accepted a £337,000 loan from former Treasury Minister Geoffrey Robinson and failed to register it with the House of Commons—despite the fact that Mandelson's department was investigating Robinson's financial affairs.

The speedy rehabilitation of Mandelson has been hailed by the media as a sign of a strong government. In reality, Mandelson's return highlights the fundamental weakness of the Blair premiership. It has shown just how few people he can rely upon. An article by Bruce Anderson, political columnist for the right-wing *Spectator*, published in both the *Daily Mail* and the *Belfast Telegraph*, pointed out, "Mr Blair has not reappointed Mr Mandelson only because they are close friends. The Cabinet may have 22 members, but very few of them are fit to be entrusted with the formidable responsibilities of Northern Ireland."

The possibility of Mandelson taking the Northern Ireland job was first raised on June 22, when the Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble called for him to replace Mo Mowlam because he had the prime minister's ear. The remarks were made at a lobby briefing that was supposed to be off the record, but they were subsequently leaked.

Blair dutifully set about implementing Trimble's demands in the July reshuffle. He faced two main obstacles: Mo Mowlam was refusing to be moved from Northern Ireland and Frank Dobson was reluctant to give up his job as Health Minister to make room for her. Mowlam had gone to the extreme of making a public appeal to Blair not to move her out of Northern Ireland. The July 20 *Daily Telegraph* reported:

"She [Mowlam] revealed her irritation over briefings in London that suggested she was to be moved to a new post of coordinating the modernisation of policies. Dr Mowlam, campaigning in the byelection in Eddisbury, Cheshire, said she hoped to stay in Ulster long enough to make a success of the efforts to achieve a political settlement." When questioned, Mowlam said: "I want to make sure I do everything I can to make the process work and I hope I am allowed to stay long enough to do that. I haven't had my fill of Northern Ireland."

As a result, Blair was left to move around some secondary figures. With George Robertson's appointment as NATO chief, Blair seized the opportunity to carry through a major reshuffle and bring back Mandelson. He convinced 60-year-old Jack Cunningham, the Cabinet Enforcer, to retire from the government earlier than expected and told Health Minister Frank Dobson to resign his post and begin the campaign for the London Mayor. Mowlam was punished for her earlier stance and was not given the position of Health Minister, the job with the largest

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ministerial budget. Instead she was demoted to replace Cunningham as Cabinet Enforcer.

Unionists have welcomed Mandelson's appointment. Having frequently criticised Mowlam for being too accommodating towards Sinn Fein, they believe Mandelson will be more receptive to their demands. An indication of the thinking behind the Unionist welcome to Mandelson is given in the British *Times* newspaper. An opinion piece by Michael Grove published October 12 says the Unionists “have to encourage Mandelson to break with [Mowlam's] failed strategy.” It speaks of "legitimate grounds for hope that Mandelson will feel a proper distaste for those aspects of Northern Ireland policy which are still pre-modern. The Northern Ireland Office's "equality agenda" owes something to *The Guardian* Women's Page of the 1970s, something to Labour's Ireland policy of the 1980s, and nothing to the needs of business or middle Ulster. It should be superseded with a hard-edged Blairite emphasis on getting the economic and security fundamentals right."

Mandelson, however, is all things to all men. The hopes of the Unionists regarding his appointment are shared by others, who attribute an entirely opposite bias to him. In an opinion piece for the October 14 edition of the southern-based *Irish Times*, for example, Frank Millar wrote: "From at least his days as a producer on LWT's Weekend World, Peter Mandelson has had a developed interest in the Northern Ireland issue. One old friend suspects ‘he is probably instinctively pro a united Ireland'.”

The old friend adds, however, "but then we know that he carries his ideological baggage lightly". Blair's reliance on a political fixer and ideological lightweight like Mandelson to pull his fat out of the fire in Northern Ireland shows how devoid of genuine substance his government is.

See Also:

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